

TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS AT ‘PERO NAKOV’ HIGH SCHOOL IN KUMANOVO

Adelina Ramadani, MA
ar118115@seeu.edu.mk
North Macedonia

ABSTRACT

The process of learning English as a Foreign Language is a very demanding and complex one. The main reason is that it differs from the mother tongue and has different rules in grammar, methodology and other parts of the language. For this reason, EFL learners have difficulties to acquire the target language, especially prepositions. Learning prepositions in a foreign language is very difficult and confusing for EFL learners most of the time. It is very important to investigate the acquisition of prepositions by Albanian learners and the challenges that they face in learning them. A comparison will be made with English prepositions and Albanian prepositions during the learning process. During the acquisition of the target language, in this case, the English language, learners encounter many challenges that reduce their motivation and interest. On the other hand, there are many effective causes when comparing the fact of what happens when a student does not acquire the target prepositions appropriately by using the most useful learning strategies in classrooms and what happens when they do acquire prepositions correctly. The outcomes of this case study present valuable information to the teachers and future research; hence, there are a limited number of studies in this field.

Keywords: SLA, prepositions, teachers, learners, strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

As second language acquisition (SLA) plays an important role in the language also the process of learning a target language is very demanding. This is because it differs from the mother tongue and has different rules in grammar, methodology and other parts of the language. For this reason, EFL learners face difficulties during the learning of a foreign language especially when acquiring prepositions. In most cases, prepositions are very challenging because they are used before different parts of words, and prepositions are described as functional words. Ding (2010, p. 364) defines the term preposition as a kind of functional word that can be added before a noun or a pronoun to construct a prepositional phrase expressing place, direction, reason, target, comparison, action means or basis (as cited in Musona & Mushangve, 2014, p. 1). According to O'Brien (2009, p. 1), "Prepositions are words that show the relationship between a noun or a pronoun and some other word or element in the rest of the sentence".

Additionally, Quirk (1985, p. 673) believes that "A preposition expresses a relation between two entities, one being that represented by the prepositional complement, the other by another part of the sentence" (as cited in Almahameed, 2018). Based on citations, prepositions are functional words that can be used before a noun or a pronoun and they express a target, place or a comparison.

Then there are many prepositions that learners use during the learning process, but the most common prepositions are: "about, above, at, around, before, beyond, during, from, on, in, over, until, up, with," etc (Azar, 1999 as cited in Ryerson University, p.1). Then prepositions have some constructions that can be very difficult for learners to acquire and to make a difference between prepositions in the target language

and in their mother tongue. According to Bakken (2017, p. 19), ‘‘prepositions take several other constructions as complements in addition to the most typical case, i.e. noun phrases, e.g. adverb phrases, adjective phrases or interrogative clauses’’.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Second Language Acquisition

The process of second language acquisition (SLA) plays a significant role in the language, and as such, this study will give students an opportunity to challenge themselves with foreign language learning. Many authors describe SLA in different ways and give their opinions based on their research field and experience.

‘‘Second Language Acquisition refers to the study of how students learn a second language (L2) additionally to their first language (L1). Although it is referred as Second Language Acquisition, ‘‘it is the process of learning any language after the first language whether it is the second, third or fourth language’’ (Stefansson, 2013, p. 2).

We can notice that SLA is a process that learners acquire a target language that differs from their mother tongue. According to Troike (2012, p. 14) ‘‘Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language’’. What is more, ‘‘The scope of SLA includes informal L2 learning that takes place in naturalistic contexts, formal L2 learning that takes place in classrooms, and L2 learning that involves a mixture of these settings and circumstances’’ (Troike, 2012, p.14).

2.2. Acquisition of prepositions

English prepositions are very challenging because there are many types of prepositions and for this reason EFL learners have difficulties in acquiring them properly. ‘‘First, as stated earlier, because each language has its own set of rules, there are clash points when learning a second language’’ (James, 2007; Jie, 2018) (as cited in Boquist, 2009 p. 9). Each language has its own rules and differs from each other, so this causes many troubles for learners to acquire prepositions properly. ‘‘Second, there is a mismatch problem between English and other languages ‘‘(Celce-Murcia & Larsen- Freeman, 1999). Usually, when one is learning a second language, he or she will try to define an English word by its native equivalent (as cited in Boquist, 2009 p. 9). Every time learners acquire prepositions in the target language, they try to find their equivalent in their mother tongue. That is why; they find prepositions very confusing and difficult to learn and to use them in the target language. Learners try to learn prepositions based on the rules of their mother tongue, and they have troubles to use prepositions correctly.

EFL learners have many difficulties to acquire English prepositions because there are many types of prepositions, such as prepositions of time, place or direction, reason, purpose, manner, prepositions of agents or things, phrasal prepositions. Each preposition has a different meaning in English, while in Albanian one preposition is used for all things. Albanian prepositions (në) are used for all things such as: for time, place, things and learners do not have any troubles to use in everyday language or to understand properly. Learners know the meaning of prepositions in their mother tongue and they do not find any problem acquiring them in the best way possible. However, English is another case because each preposition has different usage and meaning for specific purpose; it is not the same as in the Albanian language. Another case is that the number of prepositions in English is bigger than in our mother tongue. Due to this, learners find it very hard to acquire the type of prepositions because they do not understand each preposition, and they do not know how to use them in the target language.

2.3. Teachers’ strategies in the EFL classroom

Acquiring the second language is very important, but using the appropriate learning strategies in the classroom is very effective for both teachers and learners. The target language is very challenging and it has many parts that learners find very difficult to learn, so teachers have difficulties teaching learners appropriately during the lesson. For this reason, teachers should be very careful to choose the most useful strategies in order to teach the second language acquisition correctly. According to Oxford (2003) “nowadays, it is widely acknowledged that learning strategies have become one of the main factors that help students to learn a second or foreign language successfully” (as cited in Montano, 2017, p. 2). We can notice that learning strategies have a great influence on SLA and learner’s knowledge. If teachers do not use the most useful learning strategies in the classroom based on the students’ needs, then they are not able to teach their learners effectively. Therefore, teachers cannot reach their goal to transmit their knowledge to learners and help them acquire the target language. Learners will face challenges during the learning process and they will not be able to develop their language skills and critical thinking as well. Fortunately, there are many effective strategies and approaches that teachers can use in the classroom in order to teach in the best way.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out by using a qualitative approach in order to analyze and get better results on the acquisition of prepositions by EFL learners. Primary data was collected and analyzed very carefully. The main research instrument used was a questionnaire administered to EFL students at the “Pero Nakov” High School in Kumanova. The number of participants was 15 students between the age 15-18 years, of which eight were males and seven females. Comparisons were made with English prepositions and Albanian prepositions during the learning process. This research focused on the function of English prepositions and the challenges in teaching prepositions.

3.1 Research questions

During this research, the following questions are addressed:

- Which are the problematic prepositions of the English language that Albanian EFL learners have?
- Which are the most-used techniques for teaching English prepositions?

3.2 Research instruments

The Questionnaire (See appendix 1) was composed based on the students’ experiences with the learning prepositions and contained 12 questions. All questions are related to student’s experiences with English prepositions.

4. RESULTS

In the research instrument, 15 students participated in the questionnaire. Each student expressed their opinions about learning prepositions based on their experience. Different opinions are illustrated below on teaching and learning English prepositions in high schools.

Question 1: I find prepositions more difficult to understand than any other parts of speech.

- Yes: 4 students
- No: 6 students
- Sometimes: 5 students

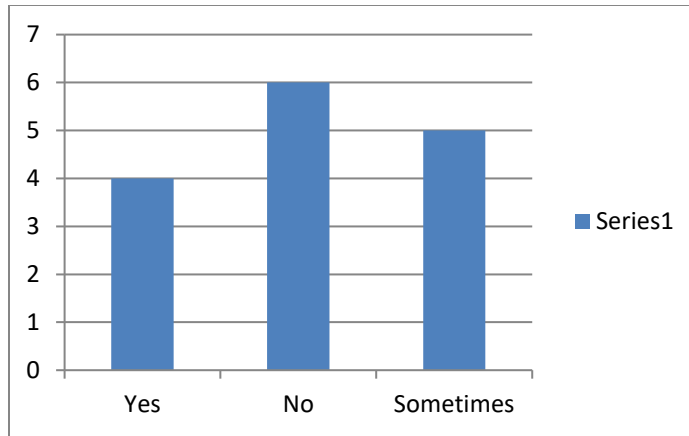


Figure 1. I find prepositions more difficult to understand than any other parts of speech

By analyzing figure 1 above, it can be seen that 4 students find preposition more difficult to understand than any other part of speech, 6 of the participants reported that they do not find prepositions difficult in comparison with other parts of speech, and 5 of them reported as having difficulties sometimes.

Question 2: I think there is a poor presentation of prepositions in texts.

- Yes: 7 students
- No: 5 students
- Sometimes: 3 students

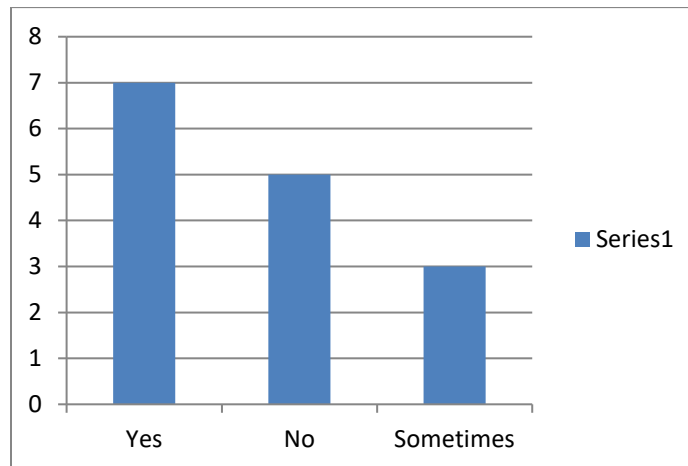


Figure 2. I think there is a poor presentation of prepositions in texts

Regarding question 2, results show that 7 students think that there is a poor presentation of prepositions in texts, while 5 students reported that they do not think that prepositions are not presented poorly, and 3 of them reported that this was sometimes the case.

Question 3: I can understand better simple prepositions (e.g. in, by, on, at, about, under) than complex prepositions (e.g. according to, out of, similar to, in case of).

- Yes: 4 students
- No: 8 students
- Sometimes: 3 students

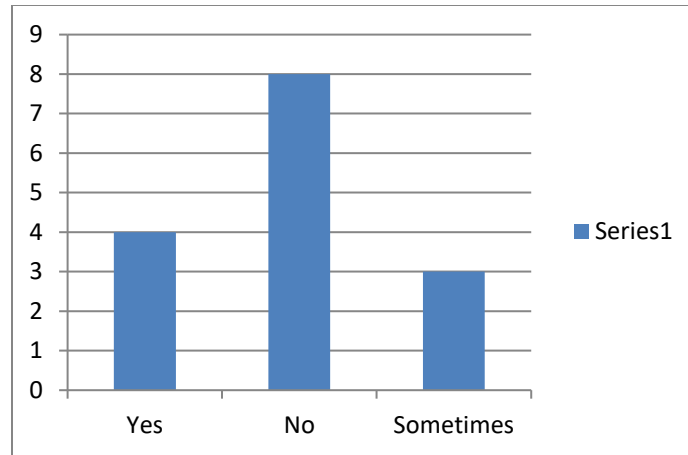


Figure 3. I can understand better simple prepositions (e.g. in, by, on, at, about, under) than complex prepositions (e.g. according to, out of, similar to, in case of)

Regarding question 3, it can be seen that 4 students understand better simple prepositions than complex prepositions and 8 students stated that they do not understand simple prepositions in comparison with the complex one and 3 of them reported facing difficulties sometimes.

Question 4: When using English prepositions, I translate directly from my mother tongue.

- Yes: 7 students
- No: 4 students
- Sometimes: 4 students

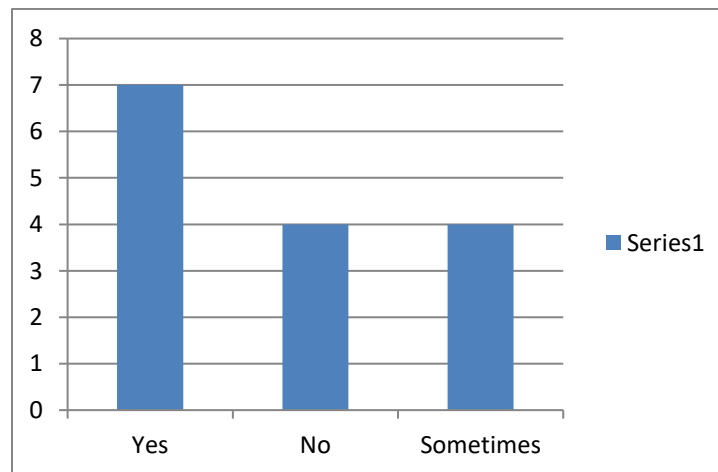


Figure 4. When using English prepositions, I translate directly from my mother tongue

Regarding question 4, it can be seen that 7 students translate prepositions directly from the mother tongue while 4 students reported that they do not use translation when they learn prepositions and 4 of the students reported that they sometimes do this.

Question 5: When I do not know the meaning of a preposition, I try to guess the right one.

- Yes: 7 students
- No: 0 students
- Sometimes: 8 students

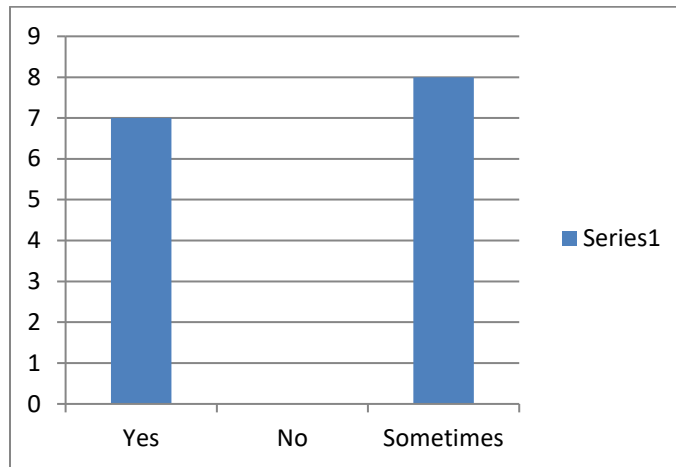


Figure 5. When I do not know the meaning of a preposition, I try to guess the right one

Regarding question 5, results show 7 students that report when not knowing the meaning of a preposition, they try to guess, and 8 of the students reported that they sometimes try to guess the meaning of a preposition.

Question 6: Prepositions are difficult because they have multiple meanings and usages.

- Yes: 11 students
- No: 2 students
- Sometimes: 2 students

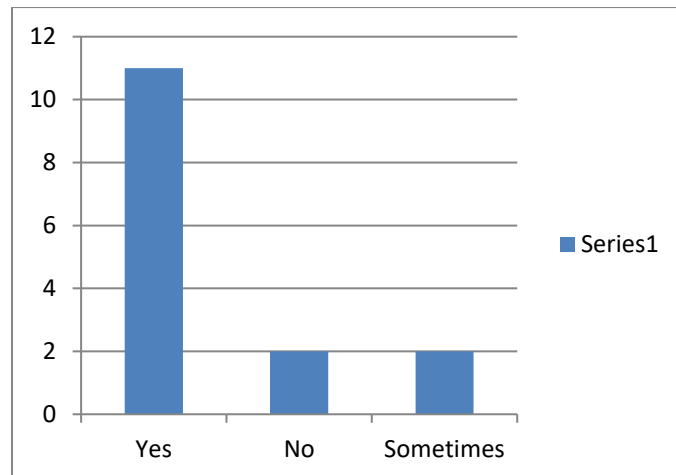


Figure 6. Prepositions are difficult because they have multiple meanings and usage

Regarding question 6, it can be seen that 11 students find prepositions difficult because they have multiple meanings and usage, while 2 students reported that they do not find prepositions challenging, and 2 of them reported them as sometimes being difficult.

5. CONCLUSION

Important conclusions can be drawn from the data obtained by the instruments of this research. The following conclusions are a confirmation of the important issues in teaching and learning English prepositions and different learners' experiences which should be taken into consideration by future

research. Based on the questionnaire results, it can be concluded that: the majority of the students found prepositions more difficult to understand than other parts of the speech. Moreover, many of the students stated that there is a poor presentation of prepositions in texts. Furthermore, most of the students claimed that they cannot understand simple prepositions in comparison with the complex prepositions. More compelling, the majority of the students translate prepositions directly from the mother tongue, and when they do not know the meaning of a preposition, they try to guess it. According to students, prepositions are very difficult because they have multiple meanings and usages. Based on the conclusions, we can notice that EFL learners have trouble learning English prepositions appropriately because there are different types of prepositions, and each type of preposition has different functions and usages. For this reason, students find prepositions the most challenging part of grammar and they are not able to acquire prepositions in the foreign language in the best way possible. Another problem is that learners try to acquire the target language based on the rules of the mother tongue and this causes trouble for learners and teachers at the same time. In order for learners to acquire prepositions correctly, teachers need to use the appropriate learning strategies in the classroom and help students to understand and learn prepositions properly.

5.1. Recommendations

Important factors that should be taken into consideration for a better flow of the research are: the number of the students within the same class, the teachers' support, and teachers' opinion about English prepositions usage in the classroom, and what benefits there are in teaching prepositions to students and them learning those properly. During this research, there was only a small number of students participating because of the pandemic. It is recommended that teachers are aware of using better instructions and learning strategies in the classroom in order to teach prepositions to students appropriately, and they have to motivate students more. We also recommend that teachers focus on grammar parts more, especially when teaching prepositions because learners find prepositions very confusing. It was notable that students participated and responded to the instrument with the fullest transparency. The instrument helped in gaining reliable and truthful results.

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Appendix

Questionnaire about prepositions

Please answer the following questions:

1. I find prepositions more difficult to understand than any other parts of speech.
 Yes No Sometimes
2. I think there is a poor presentation of prepositions in texts.
 Yes No Sometimes
3. I can understand better simple prepositions (e.g. in, by, on, at, about, under) than complex prepositions (e.g. according to, out of, similar to, in case of)
 Yes No Sometimes
4. When using English prepositions, I translate directly from my mother tongue.
 Yes No Sometimes
5. When I do not know the meaning of a preposition, I try to guess the right one.
 Yes No Sometimes
6. Prepositions are difficult because they have multiple meanings and usages.
 Yes No Sometimes
7. I can understand better the usage of prepositions when the teacher uses pictures, flashcards, videos, songs, games etc.
 Yes No Sometimes
8. I think that prepositions are the most problematic in English language.
 Yes No Sometimes
9. I use a specific method in order to acquire local prepositions (in, on at).
 Yes No Sometimes
10. Prepositions are very important when acquiring the foreign language.
 Yes No Sometimes
11. English prepositions have the same meaning and usage with the prepositions in our mother tongue.
 Yes No Sometimes
12. Teachers help you to learn prepositions properly.
 Yes No Sometimes

Adapted from: Vasile. L (2018). *Teaching Strategies and Learning Cognitive Processes of the Prepositions AT, IN, AND ON*.